

Food Stamp Challenge

One night in May I took part in a version of the Food Stamp Challenge that was sponsored by Yad Ezra, our hometown kosher food pantry that works to alleviate hunger in our area. The Food Stamp Challenge is an exercise that attempts to give people who are not supported by food stamps (or SNAP—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) an experience of shopping for food when your funds are very limited. In many ways, it is an exercise in empathy---what does it feel like to shop for food when you can only spend \$4.20 for a day's worth of food? That figure is not random. SNAP recipients receive approximately \$126/month for assistance which is \$4.20/day.

Here's what I noticed from my attempt to shop for two days' worth of food for \$8.40:

- It took me a long time to shop for my food, longer than it usually takes me. I spent a good deal of time trying to figure out what I could purchase within the limits of my budget.
- I left knowing that I didn't really have enough food. \$4.20/day doesn't buy very much and I had almost no fresh fruits or vegetables.
- There are types of food that I just wasn't going to be able to afford. We all know that kosher meat is more expensive than non-kosher meat. Both because I keep kosher myself and because Yad Ezra was the sponsor of this Food Stamp Challenge, we were instructed to purchase only kosher food. With that as a ground rule, I wasn't able to purchase any meat, chicken, or fish.
- As I finished my shopping, I realized that I felt a bit tense. Even knowing that this was an exercise, an opportunity to learn a bit, the exercise created stress. To take the exercise seriously, I really needed to see if I could take home enough food. Here's what ended up in my shopping cart--pasta, beans, rice, breakfast cereal, milk, bananas, a small can of tomato sauce, a small can of corn, and a loaf of wheat bread. That's all folks. Would I survive? Yes. But to be this limited for an indefinite future was nothing to which I would look forward. And honestly, there are issues of nutrition here which I don't have time to address here.

There are limitations to the concept of a Food Stamp Challenge. Danielle Kurtzleben writes, "the true challenge isn't just stretching a small food budget; it's deciding which other dollars will go toward food versus keeping the electricity on or to staying up to date on rent. Food is just one of myriad problems." I agree, addressing hunger means addressing poverty overall. Still, I believe that the Challenge is a helpful exercise.

Fortunately for me, The Food Stamp Challenge was only an exercise, not my reality. But here is the reality-42.2 million Americans struggle with hunger and among that number are 13.1 million children (check out mazon.org for more info.) It is a mitzvah to feed the hungry. Jewish tradition has gone from imagining that mitzvah as something that an individual was able to do directly to one for which a community is responsible. But what about a nation of hundreds of millions of people? How can we feed the hungry today? Yad Ezra, Mazon, and many other wonderful organizations work to feed the hungry, but the issue of hunger on this scale should be a priority for us on a national scale at the level of national policy.